

“Acceptable Words”

Psalm 19, Mark 8:27-38, James 3:1-12

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Mark Twain’s words about the Bible come back to me again as I encounter our scripture lesson from James today. He said: “It’s not the things in the Bible I **don’t understand** that concern me most. It’s the things that I **do** understand.”

The message of James chapter 3 is clear. It’s straightforward. It’s easy to understand. And so, with Twain, I would have to say the message in James 3 about the power of the tongue concerns me more than many of the obscure passages of the Bible I don’t understand.

James cuts to the chase. There is no “sugar-coating” of his message. The tongue is powerful. Words are powerful. Words are closely connected with attitudes and actions. “Words can encourage, teach and build up. Words can wound, deceive, discourage” (*James*, Tim Stafford, p. 21).

James is very bold to say: “Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect (mature), able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.” “Sins of speech” are right up there for James.

But what’s the big deal about words? They’re just words after all. My friend Betty about whom I’ve spoken on many occasions is a student at JMU. At 84, Betty is pursuing her drama degree and so must attend many plays and also act in scenes from various plays in the drama classes. She says she is astounded and shocked at the language in so many of the plays. She consistently tries to get parts in the scenes that do not require her to use the offensive language. Some professors and students, however, say “They’re just words. It’s no big deal. They’re just words.”

Well, what is the big deal about words and about the tongue, which utters those words? It’s just a small part of our body. What’s the big deal?

The book of Proverbs also has a lot to say about words: “Kind words bring life, but cruel words crush your spirit” (Proverbs 15:4) “Thoughtless words can wound as deeply as any sword, but wisely spoken words can heal” (Proverbs 12:18). “Be careful what you say and protect your life. A careless talker destroys himself” (Proverbs 13:3). Words can harm. Words can heal. Words are powerful.

Rumors, name-calling, racial slurs, put-downs, slips of the tongue . . . “the hastily spoken word, the untruthful suggestion, harmful gossip, innuendo, impurity”—all of these and more are harmful uses of words (*The Message of James*, Alec Motyer, p. 119). We have all had our spirits crushed by cruel or careless words. I suspect we have all been a party to crushing the spirits of others with our cruel or careless words. I know, too, that we have all felt the power of kind words in our lives and that we have all spoken kind words that have brought life to others.

Wilda, a member of the Elkton Presbyterian Church where I used to serve as pastor, said she always tries to ask herself these questions before speaking: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? Is it timely—that is, does it need to be said right now? We would all be so much better off if we, too, always asked those questions of ourselves before speaking. Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? Is it timely?

But we must not stop there, for James does not stop there. Alec Motyer in his commentary on James suggests that what James is also saying is that the tongue is like the master switch for the whole body. If you control the master switch on a switchboard or power box or a sound system, for example, you control all the lights or all the power to a building or all the sound flowing through a sound system. If you control the master switch you have ultimate control of the system. The tongue, though small, has great power. Like the bit placed in a horse's mouth or the rudder of a ship, the tongue affects the action of the whole body. It's the master switch.

Alec Motyer says this: "But should this surprise us quite so much? The tongue is so much more than what we actually say out loud. In fact actual speech is probably only a small percentage of the use of the tongue. We cannot think without formulating thoughts in words; we cannot plan without describing to ourselves step by step what we intend to do; we cannot imagine without painting a word-picture before our inward eyes; we cannot write a letter or a book without 'talking it through' our minds on to the paper; we cannot resent without fuelling the fires of resentment in words addressed to ourselves; we cannot feel sorry for ourselves without listening to the self-pitying voice which tells us how hard done by we are. But if our tongue were so well under control that it refused to formulate the words of self-pity, the images of lustfulness, the thoughts of anger and resentment, then these things are cut down before they have a chance to live; the master-switch has deprived them of any power to 'switch on' that side of our lives. It is in this way that 'if anyone makes no mistakes in speaking, he/she is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle'" (Moyer, p. 121).

Oh, to have control of the master switch in just that way. But much of the time we struggle. We can identify more with the tongue being like the wild fire destroying everything in its fierce path, like a stain that ruins a beautiful outfit, like a wild animal that cannot be tamed. Like one tiny spark in a forest, one word or one conversation can start a destructive fire in a family, in a church, even in a nation. Like one small spill on a treasured piece of clothing, one careless word or conversation can stain an encounter with another person, a relationship with someone we love.

And who among us has not felt like the wild, untamable animal, when we're speaking, particularly in arguments? We only start out intending to say just a little, and then we cut loose. We go wild. The words come out of us. We become energized. We lose control. Oh how telling and compelling to hear James say: "For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed

and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

We are so full of contradictions, aren't we? We sing on the one hand that if we had a thousand tongues we would sing God's praises, and on the other hand we use the one tongue we do have to curse others, to put other people and ourselves down, to lash out, to criticize, to make fun of others. “From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters this ought not to be so.”

A friend of mine worked in a bank with another woman who was a devout Christian. Her particular faith tradition required that she wear her hair a certain way, that her skirts be a modest length with the kick-pleats in the back of the skirts sewed up, that she wear no make-up and that she maintain her primary social relationships with those in the same church. My friend, who is also a Christian, sought to find common ground with her co-worker, “Anna.” But daily “Anna” was cursing someone. Now she didn't use “cuss words” as we say in the mountains. But daily, she was in hateful ways denouncing the president and his wife with whom she staunchly disagreed, people of different faiths and denominations, people who were different from her in any way. Women ministers were high on the list, too. My friend said: “How can this be? How can she talk about God so much and then talk about people so terribly?”

How do we talk about others? How do we talk to others? How do we talk about our enemies? It's hard to accept sometimes, but even our enemies are God's creations, people made in the image and likeness of God.

So what are acceptable words? We often pray: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O God.” What words are acceptable? That's a tough question. In Psalm 19, where the words of that prayer come from, the writer tells us something about **God's** words, which I believe are instructive to us about **our** words.

The Psalmist says that God's words “revive the soul,” they “make wise the simple,” they cause the heart to rejoice, they are clear and enlighten the eyes, God's words are pure, they are true, and they are righteous.” Somehow I believe if our words resembled God's words in these ways they would indeed be acceptable words, pleasing to God. Maybe Wilda's questions to ask of ourselves before we speak say about the same thing: “Is it true, is it kind, is it necessary, is it timely?”

Well, what will we do with all this? The truth is some of us (myself included) may not even make our way out of this building without falling short in this whole matter of speech. Some of us will not make it as far as Warwick Blvd. or Lucas Creek Road before we say something we wish we hadn't said. Some of us will not make it to our front porches or into our living rooms without lighting a fire, or making a stain with ill-chosen words. So, are we without hope?

While the gospel message is never meant to dissuade us from striving toward God's ideals or opening ourselves to growth toward greater Christian maturity, it is the voice of grace and hope that sustains us on the journey. Even

when we speak unacceptable words we can be acceptable to God. We need only speak the acceptable words that Peter spoke when he proclaimed with his tongue that Jesus was the Messiah. Because Jesus was and is the Messiah, the Savior, our rock and our redeemer, our filthy mouths can be washed clean, our unacceptable words erased, the brackish bitter water from our mouths made sweet. Because Jesus was and is the acceptable Word made flesh, the acceptable sacrifice for our sins, our unacceptable words and actions can and will be forgiven.

Because of that good news we will one day stand or dance or fall on our knees before the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. We will use our tongues to sing his praises, we will sign “hallelujah” or, maybe we will not be able to speak at all. The words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts will then be acceptable to our Lord and our God, through the mercies and grace of Jesus Christ.

Until then, we struggle. We open ourselves to grow toward God’s ideals for how we speak and how we act. So this week, I would like to encourage you as I am encouraging myself to do the following exercise recommended in Tim Stafford’s Bible study on James. “This week take inventory on the way you talk. One approach is to focus on a particular relationship—with a spouse, a parent, a child, a neighbor, a co-worker, an enemy—and take note of everything you talk about with that person in the course of three or four days. Keep a notebook.” Evaluate what you have said and how you have said it. What kind of words have you spoken?

May the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.